Holbrook – Bells

Hackett's Historical Highlights

The Story Of Mendon's Church Bell

By PETER HACKETT

If you were to visit the Mendon Unitarian Church which, architecturally, compares very well with the best of our New England white churches, you would find at the inside of the back end, near where the bell rope comes through the belfry floor, a brass plaque.

It tells briefly that in 1954 a new bell was given the church by Martha, Forrest, Donald and Harold Lowell in memory of their parents, Mr. and Mrs. Freeman C. Lowell.

The sidelight of this gift was the interesting fact that the bell came from the Hopedale Fire Department which had previously changed its alarm system from bell to whistle.

First Bell

The need for a bell by the church was the result of a storm, May 18, 1936 when lightning caused fire damage to the spire, necessitating its being rebuilt. The bell did not fall but was cracked by the heat. The tone was completely destroyed.

The first bell to be installed in the church when it was built in 1820 was a Holbrook bell. The designer and builder of the church was Elias Carter of Worcester, and it was he who, the year before, had built the Congregational Church in Milford. It is safe to presume that bell was also a Holbrook bell, made in the foundry of George H. Holbrook in that part of Medway now known as Millis.

His bells adorned the spires of churches all over the country. It is of interest to note that he was a former apprentice of Paul Revere.

King's Chapel

One of the last of the Revere bells is the rich, deep, mellowed tone bell that hangs in the stone tower of Boston's historic King's Chapel.

Cast in 1816 and weighing 2,437 pounds, it is the largest of the Revere bells. It is interesting to know that a duplicate of this bell hangs in the Unitarian Church in Providence, R.I. It was cast in the same year, 1816, and undoubtedly in the same mold.

Paul Revere died in 1818 and soon thereafter the Revere bell business came to an end.

Holbrook Foundry

The Holbrook foundry started about the time the Revere foundry came to an end. Although not legally so, it was in reality the successor to the Revere foundry and was, for a long time, the largest bell foundry in the whole country.

(Continued On Page 5)

Cont. Column 1

Ever since the famous "midnight ride," Revere's name has always been held in high popular esteem. But besides being a noted patriot and express rider, he was also a skilled mechanic, craftsman, and silversmith, and, for a time, a famous bell-caster.

Even though it is my intention to write more about George H. Holbrook, the bell-maker of Millis (formerly part of Medway), a few words about Revere would not be amiss.

Paul Revere's Bells

On April 19 of this year, right in your own home, you may well have been a witness to the great Bicentennial program that took place in the Old North Church (Christ Church), with President Ford as the chief participant. Every little while we would pause to reflect on the wonderful fact that we were a witness to both sight and sound of the whole thing right in our own living room.

Cont. Column 1

In 1792, Paul Revere made his first bell and it was for his own church, Christ Church, or Old North Church as it was affectionately but unofficially called.

It was built in 1723 and is not only the oldest church building in Boston but is also the longest in continuity of one form of worship, Church of England at first, and then Protestant Episcopal.

What the make of the first bell was, we do not know, but there is every chance it was made in England. The bell Revere made in 1792 was said to be "panny, harsh and shrill"'

But even so, Boston was proud of it and so was Paul Revere. Years later, the bell, presumably replaced by another, was bought by St. James Episcopal Church of Cambridge, probably out of sentiment or for future plans, since it had no tower in which to hang it.

It may be seen today as a priceless relic in the nave of the church where it has ever since rested.

...al Society
...1896
...196, 3 Main St.
...a 01756-0196

→ over — cont.

*Church

(Continued From Page 2)

Perhaps this would be a good time to note that the Holbrook foundry far surpassed Revere's in size and number of bells cast. In all, Holbrook produced over 11,000 as against Revere's 400.

George Holbrook was born in Wrentham on April 28, 1767, 208 years ago, and died in East Medway, Sept. 30, 1846. In 1797, we find him in Brookfield in the successful business of casting bells.

While visiting friends in Medway in 1816, he learned that the Congregational Church (Church of Christ) in East Medway (Millis) wanted to have a bell. He agreed to make one and forthwith converted a nearby shed into a foundry where the bell could be cast.

It was a novel sight and people came from all around to note its progress. In due time it was placed in the church tower where it served both church and town for many years.

Weighing 1,208 pounds, it was the first bell cast in Medway and, interestingly enough, the year of its casting, 1816, marked the beginning of the Holbrook Bell Foundry.

George Holbrook took his son, George Handel Holbrook, into the business. The son became the head of the firm in 1820 and continued as such until 1871, when he was succeeded by his grandson, Edwin Handel Holbrook, who sold out to a company in California in 1880.

Just as the Drapers were to Hopedale, the Whitins to Whitinsville and the Knowltons to Upton, so were the Holbrooks to Millis (East Medway.)

The bells made by George Holbrook were strong and well made. Those made by his son Handel, the musician, however, had a much better tone, for which he became recognized as the "foremost bell maker in America."